



An Ecofeminist Approach to Alice Walker's the Color Purple

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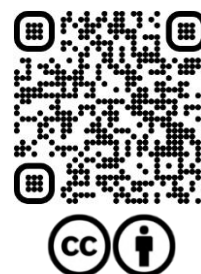
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Abstract— Alice walker, an iconic African-American, is one of the influential feminist writers in literature. She, in her works, has delineated how the African-American women have faced oppressions in terms of race, class and ethnicity and has lambasted both sexist and racist hegemony in addition to promoting an ecocentric worldview by dint of womanism. Her *The Color Purple* (1982) depicts how women as well nature are subjected to continuous exploitation and draws interconnectedness between women and nature. The paper shows how both women and nature are being exploited, subjugated and oppressed by the patriarchal world and how Celie, Shug Sofia and Squeak have been able to develop their life through eco-friendly ways of life by bucking against trouble-ridden situations.



Keywords— *Feminism, Ecofeminism, Environmentalism, Ecocriticism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism as said by Peter Berry “ which comes under the label of ecocriticism insists to give importance to existence of Nature “as an entity which affects us”. Françoise d'Eaubonne was the first French feminist who coins the term ecofeminism in her book, *Feminism or Destruction* (1974). It is a type of feminism that attempts to examine the relationship between woman's oppression and environmental exploitation in a male-dominated society. It also tackles the environmental problems and the factors that lead to the destruction of nature and the exploitation of woman. *The Color Purple*, generally considered one of her best works, won her three great American literary awards since its publication in 1982 and is undoubtedly regarded as a great and long lasting masterpiece of American literature. *The Color Purple* focuses on the physical pain, mental agony, violence of black women and how they are oppressed and tortured and depicts how women as well nature are subjected to continuous exploitation and draws interconnectedness between women and nature. The paper shows how both women and nature are being exploited, subjugated and oppressed by the patriarchal world and how Celie, Shug Sofia and Squeak have been able to develop

their life through eco-friendly ways of life by bucking against trouble-ridden situations. The novel revolves around Celie, a naive Southern black girl who later emancipates into a strong black woman realizing her potential physically, economically and spiritually by reconnecting with the nature. The paper gives a relatively comprehensive and detailed look into Walker's ecofeminist consciousness in order to evoke more people's environmental awareness and to make it easier to build a harmonious beautiful world.

II. DISCUSSION: WOMEN AND NATURE: VICTIMS OF THE PATRARCHAL SOCIETY

Alice Walker in her *The Color Purple* Alice Walker has portrayed the experiences of Black-women in a sexist and racist society . She chronicles the life of Blackwomen who are facing verbal, mental, physical and sexual abuses at the hands of patriarchal world. In *The Color Purple*, the female characters are considered to be mules, whose will is subjugated to the will of the men. As victims of patriarchy and male chauvinism, most of them have the experience of being raped, being deprived of basic human rights and finally become psychologically controlled by men. Celie,

the protagonist of the novel, is raped by her stepfather when she is only 14 years old and later gives birth to two children. After her stepfather's repeated physical and sexual violence, Celie is sold to a widower with four children to tend to. It's her industriousness and obedience as well as an attached cow that leads to the widow's decision of marrying her. However, this marriage doesn't eliminate any slightest oppressions she suffers but throws her into another "cage". To the widower, her so-called husband, she is nothing but a laborer in the field, a worker for domestic household and a sexual servant.

Alice Walker, in addition to depicting the oppression, subjugation and domination of women who are the victim of male oppressions not only because of their colour but also because of their feminine gender, delineates how nature too is being oppressed and annihilated by the oppressive chauvinistic patriarchal society. In *The Color Purple*, in order to arouse people's attention to the disastrous natural world, she presents before the reader the environmental deterioration in Olinka. What we have learnt from Nettie's letters, Olinka previously is a peaceful village located in Africa where people live in a "place without walls but with a leaf roof" (Walker, 1982, p.141). And there are "trees and trees and then more trees on top of that. They are so big they look like they were built. And vines. And ferns. And little animals. Frogs. Snakes too." The people who are the residents of the very place reside there peacefully living on the lap of beautiful serene natural environment but everything was shattered when the white road builders came. The serene beautiful Olinka village turns to be the territory of the white colonists with the fields being occupied, huts leveled, leaves of the trees cut away. In addition, the victims of this ecological disaster include not only the Olinka village but also its neighbor villages. The white colonizers aim to turn the village into a headquarter of the rubber industry by replacing the forest with rubber trees. The biological balance is completely destroyed with the animals nowhere to stay, and local people being expelled away from their homeland and forced to buy water from the planters. The white colonists, under the cloak of modern civilization, succeed in conquering the peaceful creatures there and destroying the previous ecological environment as well. According to Doris Baines, "a sixty-five-year-old woman whom Nettie and Samuel meet on their way back to England, signs of war are all over Africa and India. Trees are hauled off to make ships and captain's furniture, while the land is planted with something people can't eat. Animals are also victims of advanced human society from the primitive one to modern one, with their meat cooked into food, fur made into clothing, bones into ornament". Another important point in the novel that needs to be noted that before the aggression of the white colonists,

people in Olinka have gone through the disaster caused by their destroying the balance of ecology. This experience teaches them the lesson of the importance of keeping a harmonious relationship with nature and this lesson is then passed on from generation to generation among them. However, their awareness isn't enough to protect themselves and their natural world. The white people's colonialism once again puts them in the environmental crisis. Here, Walker intends to criticize the conspiracy of racism and colonialism that leads to the severe ecological crisis. She tries to say that people are using, exploiting and killing tress mercilessly to be benefitted economically. Actually,

Walker in her work *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997) has desired to take a walk amidst nature and see its beauty. She has said that this brings to her mind many blacks who she has known "are flexible like the grass and sheltering like the trees" (111). The solacing quality of nature has been given importance in the text *The Color Purple*. Celie imagines herself as a tree, while facing domestic violence under Albert. Celie tells Harpo, her stepson: "I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (Walker Color 22). Imagining herself as a tree, gives her the strength to combat oppression, offer resistance and make life a happy ride. Shug shelters the other women characters in the novel, like a tree, under her ecowomanist wisdom and makes them self-reliant. Furthermore, Celie as a self-reliant entrepreneur gets firmly rooted like a tree and offers employment to many women. Walker advocates that human suffering and devastation of nature, can be surmounted when the toxicity in the mind, body and the earth are removed completely. Resurrection of nature, its worship and preservation are of utmost importance to ecowomanism and Walker has talked about them in *The Color Purple*. Celie finds solace amidst the clamour of plantation life, nurturing nature on the farm. Shug makes her realize that "it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (Walker Color 167). Later on, Celie becomes a self-reliant entrepreneur and builds a home in Memphis for herself amidst nature with many artefacts of nature, symbolic of her ecowomanist awareness. Celie and Shug impart this awareness to the other women characters in the novel and accentuate their ecowomanist awareness. Nettie's stay in Olinka speaks about how, nature worship and preservation be it as simple as the worship of the roof leaf can act as a source of strength to fight oppression. Moreover, Walker has cleverly linked issues of environmental pollution, deforestation, and global warming with Nettie's stay in Olinka. She has showcased how destruction of greenery leads to the aforesaid problems, one after the other, even in a thickly vegetated country like Olinka. As pointed out by Bush "Through Nettie's story, the

theme of women's exploitation by men is set in the larger context of the exploitative relationship between races and nations" (1039). Nettie gets the healing touch by making a spiritual union with the nature after ecological destruction of beautiful Olinka made by the chauvinistic white men.

III. CONCLUSION

Alice Walker in her famous novel *The Color Purple* delineates how women and nature share the same miserable fate under common oppressions done by the ruling dominating chauvinistic patriarchal society. She explores the connections between women and nature through spiritual amendments. She has said that "In day-to-day life, I worship the Earth as God-- representing everything-- and nature as its spirit" (Walker Anything 9). She argues that an anthropocentric, patriarchal Christian view that the universe is only for man, will be very taxing for the ecosystem and she recommends paganism as a way of promoting an ecocentric worldview. However, Walker through the novel draws the interconnectedness between women and nature. Ruether said about women in the very novel "They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations". The unity and mutual beneficial bonds among them can help them stand up against the oppressive chauvinistic patriarchal society who for their own benefits exploit, torture and subjugate both women and nature.

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